



## To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education examination invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

Mark Minott, Independent Researcher, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this small-scale grounded approach qualitative study was to examine the extent to which the skill of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant to the role of further and higher education examination invigilators, particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present. The importance of this study rested in the fact that there is a paucity of research which examines the role of examination invigilators at the further and higher education levels. Therefore, it aids in filling a literary gap and gives them a 'voice' in the research literature. Study participants were six examination invigilators, working in a London further education college. Purposeful convenience or opportunity sampling was used in their selection. Interviews and documentary analysis were the research methods used. The main research question was: 'To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of further and higher education examination invigilators?' This also formed the topic for this paper. The findings revealed the fact that examination invigilators have a common understanding of the research term 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action, and rated it relevant, very relevant and extremely relevant to their role. Relevance was linked to its usefulness, i.e., usefulness in various circumstances; decision making; preventing mistakes and uncovering students' duplicity. Implication of the findings are discussed.

**Keywords:** examination invigilator, exam invigilation, higher education, reflection-in-action, proctor, further education

### Introduction

The terms invigilator (UK) or proctor (USA) are assigned to people with the tasks of ensuring that examinations are carried out according to rules set by further and higher education institutions. Minott (2018) states that examples of duties to be performed by examination invigilators before an examination may include the following.

- Setting up examination venues by laying out stationery, equipment and examination papers.
- Preparing envelopes in which to place completed examination papers.

Examples of duties to be performed during an examination may include the following.

- Directing candidates to their seats and advising them about possessions permitted in examination venues.
- Ensuring that candidates do not talk once inside the examination venue.
- Dealing with queries raised by candidates and dealing with examination irregularities.
- Checking attendance during examinations.
- Recording details of early leavers and collecting their examination papers.
- Escorting candidates from the examination venue during the examinations as required, and supervising candidates whilst outside the examination venue.

Examples of duties to be performed after an examination may include the following.

- Collecting and collating examination papers at the end of the examination.
- Supervising candidates leaving examination venues, ensuring that they do not remove equipment or stationery from the venue.
- Ensuring that candidates leave venues in an orderly and quiet manner.

## To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which the skill of 'thinking on your feet'/ reflection-in-action is relevant to carrying out these tasks and more specifically, the role of further and higher education examination invigilators, particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present.

There is however a shortage of literature which connects the ideas of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action with examination invigilators and their role in the examination process. A search of over 64 databases using the following keywords and search parameters: 'Thinking on your feet' OR 'Reflection-in-action' AND 'examination' AND 'invigilation' AND 'Articles' AND 'year: 2000-2019', returned 0 hits. This finding lends significance to this study and suggests that the 'voice' of the examination invigilator may be muted in the literature (Minott, 2018).

### 'Thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action - A review of the literature

Bond (2011), researching school principals' ability to 'think on their feet' made the point that the phrase simply describes the concept of reflection-in-action. This is thinking that occurs on the spot, in the thick of things, without the time to carefully analyse underlying factors of an event or situation. Schön (1987) likens this occurrence to a jazz musician who has to make up the music on the spot, i.e., improvise. Schön (1987) and Adler (1994), argue that the ability to frame a problematic event is critical to 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action. Framing is the ability—during an actual event—to identify exactly what is the problem, the reason for it, and quickly make a decision about what action to take or response to give.

Bond (2011), in answering the question of what experienced principals reflect on during an unpleasant event or 'how they think on their feet' during such an event, made the point that firstly, they take a few seconds to 'gather themselves' and secondly, access accumulated professional experience or knowing-in-practice (Schön, 1987), and quickly make a decision about what action to take or what response to give. Schön (1983), in discussing the phrase 'knowing-in-practice', states that competent practitioners usually know more than what they can say, and this knowledge is tacit, and is what they draw on while in action.

Bindels, Verberg, Scherpbier, Heeneman, & Lombarts (2018), in discussing reflection and physicians, and Bond (2011) speaking about school principals' ability to reflect, both raised the issue of self-talk or internal dialogue or a private conversation with oneself. It seems from their writings that this is integral to 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action and contributes to appropriate on the spot decision making. For example, via self-talk principals arrive at decisions which include remaining calm and being poised when being verbally attacked. Additionally, situations in the daily practice of the physicians and the principals act as triggers for self-talk, internal dialogue or a private conversation with self.

Posner (1989) claims that the ability to reflect and, by extension, to 'think on your feet'/reflect-in-action is a defining feature of being human and is essential to living a useful and successful life. There are, however, those who are more or less inclined to do so. This view suggests that those so less inclined have the capacity - via education and training - to develop the skill of thinking on their feet (Minott, 2009). There are several websites and articles that purport to teach how to 'think on your feet'. For example, Independent Writer (2006) and Hurwitz (2006), point out that learning to 'think on your feet'/reflect-in-action involves 'being in the moment', which is being totally focused, undistracted by past or future life events, staying positive and listening actively, i.e., focus on what you are hearing. I can infer from Mind Tools (2019) that the secret to 'thinking on your feet'/reflect-in-action is to be prepared. To apply this to the examination invigilator means there is a need for the invigilator to learn about the examination process and what is required by attending training sessions. Among several actions to improve this ability, the Mind Tools (ibid) also highlights listening.

While this succinct literature review identified potentially the relevance of the skill of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action generally, what was still unknown was the extent to which the skill was relevant to local examination invigilators particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present. Therefore, a study was launched to answer the broad research question: 'To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of further and higher education examination invigilators?' Achieving this aim aids in filling a literary gap, thus giving invigilators a 'voice' in the research literature.

### Participants

The participants in this study were six invigilators – one male and five females – who had between 5-10 years' invigilation experience. They were all employed by a London-based further education college as temporary workers, where they carried out the tasks of invigilation. Purposeful convenience or opportunity sampling was used in the selection of the participants, who were considered 'information rich'. Guba & Lincoln (1998), state that 'information-rich participants' are able to provide insight into the issue of importance to any study. An examination of the findings in this paper and the responses of the participants will reveal that they provided relevant and unique perspectives on the research issue. In order to answer the broad research question, the participants were asked the following:

1. What is your understanding of the term, 'think on your feet'?

To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

2. How relevant to your role as an examination invigilator in a further education college is the ability 'to think on your feet' and why?

The participants willingly agreed to participate in the study, provided their names were not included. This was agreed, and (as will be shown later) they were referred to as examination invigilator—EI.1- 6—and no mention of names was made in this paper. The leadership of the College examination board was aware of the research. I, however, excluded the name of the College from this report.

### Data Collection Methods

Documentary analysis and interviews were the data collection methods used. Cortazzi (2002), makes the point that documents employed in educational research are many, ranging from policy documents to graffiti on walls. For this paper, examination invigilation policies and job descriptions were examined. The purpose was to supplement the interviews, that is, to confirm or make more or less plausible, interview findings. Interviews were the main data collection method.

Over the course of a week, and at a time during the day considered convenient by each, participants were asked individually two research questions (see questions in the foregoing discussion). Interviews lasted 5-10 minutes. The decision to limit interviews to 5-10 minutes was based on the need to not unduly impinge on the invigilators' 'free' time.

As will be shown later in this paper, the documentary analysis and participants' responses to the research questions asked, revealed the extent to which the skill of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action is relevant to the role of further and higher education examination invigilators, particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present.

### Data Analysis

This study does not stick slavishly to the procedure advocated by originators of the grounded theory approach to research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978), but followed their general principles (Robson, 2007). LaRossa (2005), made the point that the grounded theory approach is designed to be changed, moulded and used appropriately for each individual's need, and there is no prescribed set of rules to follow. Therefore, for this study, I analysed the responses to the research question using a content analysis process. To focus the analysis, I placed together in files, answers to the questions according to participants. By reading and re-reading the responses and using my own judgement and experience to make sense of the answers, I categorised the responses. Categories were mainly words and phrases which I thought condensed and expressed the essence of the given responses. For example, responses include phrases such as 'extremely relevant according to circumstances', 'very relevant when making a decision', 'relevant in uncovering students' deception' and 'very relevant in preventing mistakes'. Based on these subthemes, I formulated the main theme 'usefulness'. This main theme and subthemes were used to reveal the extent to which the skill of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action is relevant to the participants' role as further and higher education examination invigilators, particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present.

Documentary analysis as a research method was also used in the triangulation process. Bush (2012), in Briggs, Coleman & Morrison (2012), state triangulation (the use of two or more data collection methods) helps to cross-check data to establish their soundness, which in turn facilitates accuracy in research conclusions drawn. The aim of the analysis was to ascertain indicators from examination invigilation policies and job descriptions of the need for 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action.

### Discussion

The essence of this paper is summarised in a quotation from one participant. The participant said:

*It [examination invigilation] is a very big responsibility, so you have to keep your composure and stay calm even when responding to difficult students and even though you may be anxious about doing everything correctly. With all that can happen in an examination room, there is the need to be able to problem solve on the spot and to think it through and 'thinking on your feet' enables these to happen (EI.3).*

Firstly, an analysis and synthesis of the answers to Interview Question 1 reveals the fact that the participants understood the term 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action as primarily a cognitive activity occurring under pressure, 'on the go', 'in a haste' 'on the spot' and 'quietly', whose end product is a decision. For example, deciding whether or not to allow a student a toilet break during a period where the examination policy says it is not allowed, or deciding when to refer an issue to a senior invigilator. This understanding is in line with that of Bond (2011) and Schön (1987), who see 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action as thinking that occurs on the spot, in the thick of things without the time to carefully analyse underlying factors of an event or situation, resulting in a response, activity or action or non-action.

## To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

Secondly, all examination invigilators rated the skill of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action as relevant, very relevant or extremely relevant. This finding is supported by the documentary analysis for the need for the skill is implied in many examination invigilation job descriptions and policies. For example, 'The invigilator should ensure that no cheating or communication takes place during the exam. If students are found cheating then the invigilator must follow the procedure set by the school to deal with this' (Baker, 2017); 'Invigilators must respond to candidate queries in accordance with exam regulations' (Coventry University, 2016); 'invigilating during examinations: dealing with queries raised by candidates and dealing with examination irregularities in accordance with strict procedures' (King's College London, 2019); and 'During the examination the invigilator must respond to queries from students as quickly as possible (Giles, 2017). These statements imply the need to be able to 'think on your feet'/reflect-in-action about procedures and rules and to do so quickly. This is so because experience has shown that an examination invigilator—fully engaged in invigilating an examination— is unlikely to have in her/his possession the University's examination invigilation book or policy document to which to refer and, given the immediacy and the need for quick responses in such situations, referring to a policy document may be impractical.

Thirdly, the analysis of the participants' responses to the 'why' portion of Research Question 2, revealed that they linked the relevance of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action' to usefulness. Usefulness in various circumstances; decision making; preventing mistakes and uncovering students' duplicity.

### **'Thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant because it is useful in various circumstances**

---

The relevance and importance of reflection in educational contexts and, by extension, 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is well documented (See, for example, Schön, 1983, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1999; Minott, 2009), and study participants acknowledge the skill as relevant to extremely relevant to their role as examination invigilators. While this is the case, they point out that its use is subject to circumstance and situation—such as the type of career in which one is involved (EI.1 & EI.4).

Examination invigilator 4 (EI.4) gave the following example of an incident in which 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action was very relevant.

*I think it is very relevant. I remember a student wanting to leave the examination room during a time he was not allowed to. Right there and then I thought of the training I had received and remembered that we were told to remind students of the rules by referring them to the college exam policy and the fact that this is also written in the student examination handbook. I then did just that and the student settled down (EI.4).*

While it is a requirement for examination invigilators to respond quickly to students in accordance with written policies (Baker, 2017; Coventry University, 2016), EI.4 seems to have taken this a step further. For, by not only reflecting on the policies but reminding the student of it, it was used as a way to get the student to conform to expected rules and procedures. Additionally, it could be argued that in the process of 'thinking on her feet'/reflection-in-action, she 'framed' the problem (Schön, 1987; Adler, 1994) as the student not remembering the policy and procedures and proceeded to remind him of these.

### **'Thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant because it is useful in decision making**

---

Bond (2011), in answering the question of what experienced principals reflect on during an unpleasant event, or 'how they think on their feet' during such an event, made the point that they access accumulated professional experience or knowing-in-practice (Schön, 1987) and quickly make a decision about what action to take or what response to give. For examination invigilators, their accumulated professional experience also involved the training they received and their understanding of the invigilation policies. This is supported by the thoughts of EI.2, who made the point that in making decisions she pulls on her knowledge of the policy in use—which can be argued— contributes to her accumulated professional experience.

'Whatever decision I make, resulting from 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action, is influenced by the policy. I use the policy as a guide for thinking—taking my responsibility seriously always means taking into consideration the policy' (EI.2).

While EI.6 sees the use of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action as extremely relevant to her role as an invigilator, she made a point worth noting about inappropriate decisions and their potential consequences. 'Your action may be affecting someone's future...an inappropriate decision you make on the spot may have life or career changing implications for the student—negatively' (EI.6). She cites the time she allowed a heavily pregnant student out of the room for a toilet break during the phase in the examination process when this was not allowed. While she thought about the policy, the woman's condition required that she [EI.6] go against the policy on that occasion.

To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

### 'Thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant because it is useful in preventing mistakes

Bindels, et al. (2018) and Bond (2011) highlight the importance of self-talk or internal dialogue or a private conversation with oneself. They see this as integral to 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action and in arriving at appropriate decisions. Both writers point out that unexpected situations trigger this internal dialogue. EI.3 demonstrates this internal dialogue in this account.

*We had a student in the Personal Examination Area taking an examination using the computer. The student asked a question and I was tempted to say "yes, that is okay" but I looked at my colleague and—right there—thought to myself "what exactly is this student asking permission to do?" I thought about the policy and had to say to the student, "no" you are not allowed to do that during the examination (EI.3).*

### 'Thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant because it is useful in uncovering students' duplicity

The place of listening actively in the process of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action is emphasized by Independent Writer (2006) and Hurwitz (2006), who point out that learning to 'think on your feet'/reflection-in-action involved many things, including focusing on what you are hearing. For the examination invigilator who must respond to candidate queries (Coventry University, 2016; King's College London, 2019) and must do so as quickly as possible (Giles, 2017), careful listening is critical. One participant in responding to Research Question 2 spoke of the following event.

*A student demanded a toilet break claiming that he had to go based on medical reason, I said to him, I need to call the first aid personnel to confirm your medical claim, [and] the student suddenly said he was just fooling around, just 'kidding' (EI.5).*

At first glance, this episode may seem to be about making a decision based on the skill of 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action. However, a closer examination of the participant's 'on the spot response' will reveal the fact that he was listening keenly to the student and by so doing latched onto the medical reason claim and was able to arrive at a solution that uncovered the student's duplicity.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

All participants rated the skill of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action as relevant, very relevant or extremely relevant. This finding is supported by the documentary analysis where the need for the skill is implied in many examination invigilation job descriptions and policies. There is, however, a need to have the skill or synonyms explicitly stated, not just implied in examination invigilators' job descriptions and institutional examination policy documents. This is so because this study shows 'thinking on your feet' / reflection-in-action to be not just critical but indispensable to the role of an examination invigilator. Without it, the invigilator is totally impotent in performing the tasks associated with the role. Also, explicitly including the skill in examination documentations would further highlight its importance to being an invigilator and the invigilation process.

Given the critical nature of thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action to the role of the invigilators, training sessions may need to include case studies and or vignettes which engage examination invigilators in applying the skill. This study provides a few examples that could be usefully employed. Doing so would, firstly, signal to invigilators the importance of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action and, secondly, sharpen these skills in potential invigilators. This added reflective/educational component to training sessions would also aid in transforming them from just being events where one is told what to do in an examination to truly a reflective training exercise where participants are encouraged to use their critical reflective ability. This could also aid in raising the profile of such sessions in the minds of invigilators.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to ascertain the extent to which the skill of 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action is relevant to the participants' role as further and higher education examination Invigilators, particularly during the phases of an examination where students are present. The main limitation of this study rests in the fact that it was conducted with a small sample of examination invigilators, a total of six, working in a single further education college in London, thereby limiting the possible generalisation of the findings. The extent to which the skill is relevant to participants' role as invigilators can be seen in the fact that they all have a common understanding of the phrase and are able to clearly articulate this. The skill is used in various circumstances: decision making; preventing mistakes and uncovering students' duplicity which are critical facets of the role of an examination invigilator.

To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

*Biography*

Mark Minott is an independent researcher with research interests in the areas of teacher education, music education, reflective teaching, and the arts in education. He has published in journals both in the UK and internationally. Mark is also the author of several books on reflective teaching.

*References*

- Adler, S. (1994). Reflective practice and teacher education. In R.E. Wayne (Ed.) *Reflective Practice in Social Studies*, Washington DC, USA: National Council for the Social Studies.
- Baker, N. (2017). A Job Description for an Exam Invigilator. Retrieved from: <https://careertrend.com/about-6626876-job-description-exam-invigilator.html>.
- Bindels, E., Verberg, C., Scherpbier, A., Heeneman, S., & Lombarts, K. (2018). Reflection revisited: How physicians conceptualize and experience reflection in professional practice – a qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education*, 18(1) 1-10. doi:10.1186/s12909-018-1218-y
- Bond, J. (2011). Thinking on Your Feet: Principals' International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation 6 (4). Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974347.pdf>
- Bush, T. (2012). Authenticity in research: reliability, validity, and triangulation. In A. R. Briggs M. Coleman & M. Morrison (Eds.), *Research methods in educational leadership & management* (pp. 75-89). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781473957695.n6
- Cortazzi, M. (2002). Analyzing narratives and documents. In M. Coleman & A.R.J. Briggs, *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*. London: Sage.
- Coventry University (2016). Exams Invigilator. Retrieved from: [https://www.cambridgeeducationgroup.com/ugc/1/1/9/0/exam\\_invigilator\\_onscampus\\_coventry.pdf](https://www.cambridgeeducationgroup.com/ugc/1/1/9/0/exam_invigilator_onscampus_coventry.pdf)
- Ghaye, T. & Ghaye, K. (1999). *Teaching and Learning through Critical Reflective Practice*. London: David Fulton.
- Giles, C. (2017). Exam Invigilator Duties. Retrieved from: [https://www.ehow.co.uk/about\\_6626876\\_job-description-exam-invigilator.html](https://www.ehow.co.uk/about_6626876_job-description-exam-invigilator.html).
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Theories of qualitative research*. Mill Valley California: The Sociology Press, USA.
- Glaser, B. (1978). Theoretical Sensitivity. *Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley California : The Sociology Press, USA.
- Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N.K Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research theories and issues* (pp. 195–220). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hurwitz, S. (2006). Can you learn to think on your feet? Improvisational actors and jazz musicians do it all the time. Here's what you can learn from their techniques. *Across the Board*, 43(2), 16-22.
- Independent Writer (2006). How thinking on your feet can be taught: Improvisation needn't be as risky as it seems. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 20(5), pp. 31-34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777280610688041>
- King's College London. (2019). Job Description: Examination Invigilator. Retrieved from: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/campuslife/acservices/examinations/invigilators/invigilatorJD.pdf>
- LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded Theory Methods and Qualitative Family Research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(4), 837-857. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00179.x>
- Mind Tools. (2019). Thinking on Your Feet. Staying Cool and Confident Under Pressure. Retrieved from <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/ThinkingonYourFeet.htm>
- Minott, M.A., (2018). External Examination Invigilators' (EEl)s beliefs and inference about activities they consider important: Implication for examination policy. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 6(1), 47-54.
- Minott, M.A. (2009). *Reflection and Reflective Teaching, A case study of four seasoned teachers in the Cayman Islands*. VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co, Germany.

To what extent is 'thinking on your feet'/reflection-in-action relevant to the role of Further and Higher Education Examination Invigilators? Implications for examination policy and practice

Posner, G. J. (1989). *Field Experience Methods of Reflective Teaching*. New York: Longman Publishing.

Robson, C. (2007). *How to do a research project, a guide for undergraduate students*. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing.

Schön, D.A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

Zeichner, K. M. & Liston, D. P. (Eds) (1996). *Reflective Teaching – an introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.